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DE RUEHSL #0401/01 2610814  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
P R 180814Z SEP 09  
FM AMEMBASSY BRATISLAVA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0160  
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE  
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC  
RUEHSL/AMEMBASSY BRATISLAVA 0196

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BRATISLAVA 000401

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [HU](#) [LO](#)

SUBJECT: FICO/BAJNAI MEETING: PROGRESS WITH RESERVATIONS

REF: BUDAPEST 667

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#### Summary

1. (SBU) Following last week's Fico/Bajnai meeting, the reactions across the Slovak political scene indicate that while the meeting may be the start of a beautiful relationship, we're not quite there yet. Fico used the joint press conference to score a few points against Hungarian nationalists, despite the 11-point accord promising closer cooperation. Back in Bratislava, the Slovak National Party (SNS) predictably ranted against concessions to Hungarians, while the Speaker of Parliament ordered the halt--over protest--to an SNS petition drive supporting the language law. The ethnic Hungarians were split between mild skepticism and mild optimism, and President Gasparovic used a weekend television appearance to characterize the Hungarians as difficult. With an election coming up, and much political hay apparently to be made playing the nationalist card, we expect erratic progress at best. But at least Fico has not missed another opportunity to make a friendly gesture. End summary.

#### A First Step, but Only That

2. (SBU) Now that the September 10 Fico/Bajnai meeting has had some time to resonate across the Slovak political spectrum, it is clear that, while it probably represents a good and necessary first step (reftel), it has not begun to change the political dynamic of the relationship with Hungary and ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia. The first indication of business as usual was Fico's political point-scoring at the joint press conference with Bajnai. Whereas the joint statement issued on 10 September promised that both sides would accept the OSCE's recommendations on the language law, Fico noted at the press conference that the law is fine as it is, that it has been maligned by the foreign (read "Hungarian") press, and that "not a single article needs to be changed." In short: I'm still right.

#### Dueling Saints and Explosive Hungarians

3. (SBU) Fico also suggested that the next meeting be held in Komarno, and that the Mayor should by then have found an appropriate place for the statue of Cyril and Methodius that the Mayor has so far declined to place in the main square. He went on to propose slyly that it should be placed next to the statue

of St. Stephen (the unveiling of which was the reason for President Solyom's ill-fated trip to the Slovak border), and that the PMs can unveil it to symbolize their mutual understanding. One could see this remark as a sort of self-deprecating humor, but a more cynical political dig at the Mayor of Komarno and his Hungarian nationalism is a more likely read.

¶4. (U) Meanwhile, Slovak National Party (SNS) Chairman (and governing coalition partner) Jan Slota was predictably one of the first in Bratislava to react to the summit and its (qualified) message of reconciliation. His tone was typically immoderate: "Hungary is an explosive in Central Europe," he declared. "If there is no agreement on reciprocity and no explanation provided on the genocide of Slovaks in Hungary, relations cannot improve." He criticized Foreign Minister Miroslav Lajcak as a "weak diplomat" who made too many concessions to Hungarians. He backed up his rhetoric by suggesting that MPs from the Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK) and MOST-HID, who had consulted with Hungarian legislators protesting the language law, be ousted from Parliament for treason. Vladimir Meciar, former prime minister and chairman of coalition partner HZDS, paused from his recent attacks on Slota to table a proposal to expel the members. The proposal is still awaiting debate.

¶5. (U) Slota also lambasted Speaker Pavol Paska, who canceled SNS's perfectly timed petition drive to gather signatures in Parliament supporting the language law. Party deputy chair Anna Belousova offered to defend the brightly colored stand for collecting signatures (with the catchy slogan "Slovakia in Slovak" prominently displayed) with her own body if necessary, even against Parliament's Sergeant-at-Arms. Happily, no one took her up on the offer, and the stand was quietly removed later in the day. (The press later lampooned Belousova for making six grammatical errors in the language petition.)

Moderation from Hungarians, not from Gasparovic

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¶6. (U) Opinions from the ethnic Hungarian parties varied from slightly skeptical to slightly optimistic. The deputy chairman of SMK, Jozsef Berenyi, wondered who is going to guarantee that the 11 points agreed upon would be observed and questioned why, given an existing general treaty on the relationship between the countries, there needed to be any intervention from OSCE. Bela Bugar, who split from SMK and founded his own political party (MOST-HID), was more optimistic, saying that the dialogue is a good start and that the 11 points should be observed by both sides.

¶7. (SBU) President Ivan Gasparovic passed up his opportunity to be the gracious head of state, perhaps because his offer to meet with his counterpart on the margins of the September 13-14 V4 meeting in Poland had been snubbed. (According to press reports here, the Hungarians are still waiting for an explanation of Slovakia's now-famous refusal to admit Solyom for the Komarno event.) Gasparovic said on national television last weekend that while Slovakia has no communication problems with its other neighbors, Hungary has problems with everyone. He added that it is important to discuss differences in opinions, but that Hungary avoids bilateral discussions.

Comment: The Horror of Perception

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¶8. (SBU) We should hardly expect that the rocky relationship between the Slovaks and Hungarians--both those living in Hungary and their own ethnic minority--will be resolved by talks between the two heads of government. It appears that the horror of being perceived as fractious and petty in the EU context (particularly in the wake of the Solyom debacle) has won out over petty fractiousness for the moment. To put it more positively, Fico has at least not failed once again to make a

minimal gesture of good neighborliness. While we welcome the public resolution to follow the OSCE's lead on the language law, we remain guarded, knowing that Fico defers to international opinion when it seems important politically, and defies it when that carries a bigger political benefit. With an election coming up and more votes to be had than lost by playing the nationalist card, we expect erratic progress at best. End comment.

19. (U) This cable has been coordinated with Embassy Budapest.  
EDDINS